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ABSTRACT

Evaluation of adult literacy programs requires different criteria from those used to judge regular schooling. Indicators for evaluating adult voluntary programs with individualized curricula are recruitment; retention, including absenteeism; one-on-one tutoring with volunteers; training in a context; support services; the "quick-fix" syndrome; appropriate curriculum; and teachers who care. Common evaluation hazards are claiming much and providing evidence of little, selecting measures not logically related to the program, use of grade-equivalent scores, use of different instruments for pretesting and posttesting, and careless collection of data. Evaluations of programs in Philadelphia and Boston found that (1) low-literate adults often have highly developed coping skills and see little reason to upgrade their literacy level; (2) funding for illiterate adults is difficult to find because sources often expect yearly success rates, sometimes leading programs to accept only the better readers; and (3) quantitative tests tend to be geared to specific skills rather than relevant content. (Addresses and telephone numbers of seven resources are listed.) (CML)

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MYTH #7:

LITERACY PROGRAMS ARE FAIL-SAFE

The nation's attention to the problem of literacy is staying on the front burner. The ABC/PBS PLUS campaign moves this fall to a focus on youth literacy. The print media, through the American Newspaper Publishers Association Literacy Day on September 8, will remind the public in various ways of the importance of a national effort to improve literacy.

The task forces formed through the PLUS campaign that began in 1986 created community interest, expanded the number of volunteers and increased the number of adults seeking help, according to a study of their first year.

Coming up are more inducements for adult literacy programs to expand. The amendments to federal education programs authorize increased spending and new initiatives, as does the pending trade bill. Welfare reform legislation, which probably will come out of conference between the House and Senate in September, requires recipients to move from welfare to work with basic education and job training. If approved, every state will become heavily involved in an expansion of literacy programs; a half-dozen of the more populous states already have a track record on education requirements of welfare recipients.

With much public investment in adult literacy, and more on the way, is the effort paying off? What seems to be getting the most results for the money? Are we in another cycle of the "quick fix", a phenomenon which researcher Tom Sticht says characterizes the crisis mentality of adult literacy programs in this century.

How to Tell

Evaluation of programs in the adult literacy area is a whole lot different from what schools use to judge student progress. Adult programs, for the most part, are voluntary. The curriculum is individualized. Test scores depend on a lot of variables. So, when trying to figure out if adult literacy programs are working, you need to come up with a different set of indicators. (Trying to decide how and what to evaluate, and what makes a good program, so stumped the experts at the U.S. Department of Education that a publication on what works in adult literacy, announced by the secretary of education last spring, is still on the drawing boards. It may never be released.)

Some suggestions on what to look at:

o Recruitment. Research shows that undereducated adults respond to personal encouragements to enroll in literacy programs much more than through media campaigns or print literature. Students (cont. on page 2)

LITERACY DAY REMINDERS ...

The Media Resource Project on Literacy of the Education Writers Association, in cooperation with the Institute for Educational Leadership, maintains a clearinghouse of information on topics that reporters/editors might want to cover. During this year, the project, funded by the MacArthur Foundation, also has produced a series of *Literacy Beats*, each one dealing with a specific issue. These have included family and school intergenerational issues, workplace literacy, illiteracy and the South, the GED, definitions and an overview of the literacy problem. As well, the project has produced papers examining literacy and newspaper readership and how reporters cover literacy. If you missed one, contact EWA for additional copies.

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who have been or are enrolled in programs are the most successful recruiters, and teachers in the programs can develop good rapport with potential enrollees.

The research also shows that businesses may not refer to programs the workers who need literacy help the most. Business personnel tend to "cream" for literacy programs those workers with the most potential for promotion. Also, many adults have hidden their illiteracy from supervisors; subtle recruiting messages need to be used with them, such as including basic skills as part of overall job skill training.

Also, one study of 100 personal interviews in a depressed inner-city area found that "hard-core illiterates" were concerned primarily about economic necessities. Social agencies need to collaborate on solving basic economic problems of these individuals before they can be interested in literacy programs. Other researchers single out a "lack of hope" as the primary reason adults resist enrolling in adult basic education, often because of previous experiences with failure in formal education.

The most frequent reasons adults give for enrolling in adult basic education are to improve chances for employment or promotion, to help their children and to gain self-improvement.

Some literacy programs, particularly those serving adults with language backgrounds other than English, report long waiting lists. Lack of funding and of trained staff inhibit services. Researcher David Harman estimated in 1985 that only 5% of adults needing literacy help were receiving it.

o **Retention**. The low retention rate of enrollees is a serious problem. Harman says a dropout rate of 50 - 70 percent is to be expected. Robert Taggart, who evaluated demonstration education and training programs for young adults conducted under the Comprehensive Education and Training Act in the late 1970s, estimated that only a few of each 100 participants "have the endurance or capacity for the one, two, or even four-year training" needed to give them lifelong competencies.

Ironically, Taggart distilled out of the demonstration programs the strategies that seemed to work best and developed them into a computerized system now known as the Comprehensive Competencies Program. Sticht studied the attrition rate from the CCP programs and found that after 100 hours of instruction, only 13% of the enrollees were still in the program (1986).

California's competency-based adult skills education program has somewhat better luck: 49% of the students were still in the program after 100 hours of instruction.

Absenteeism is another factor to look at. One study, of programs in New Jersey, found classes that claimed to be serving 20 students actually had average attendance of only two to three students.

Harman and others say that the reasons for absenteeism and dropping out have more to do with the socio-economic stresses on the participants than with the inadequacies of the programs. However, others contend the programs are not meeting the needs of the enrollees.

o **One-on-one Tutoring with Volunteers**. This works for some participants, not for others. For those with no skills, the individualized tutoring may help. If the student's problem is due to a learning disability, specially trained teachers are required, while a great deal of attention is being paid to volunteer literacy programs, research shows that with functionally literate adults, they are not a "cure".

o **Training in a Context.** Adults who are functionally literate and need to upgrade their literacy, not start from a skill level below fourth-grade reading, should be taught in the context of a job skill, claims Sticht (who has developed several such programs for the military). They are motivated by their hopes for jobs and a better life, not driven by a general interest in reading better.

o **Support Services.** To recruit, retain and help adults learn to function independently, good literacy programs, according to some evaluations, must include extensive counseling and collaboration with other agencies to focus on the needs of participants. This particularly is true for young adults who are school dropouts.

o **The "Quick-fix" Syndrome.** Says Sticht: "It reflects the crisis mentality and lack of knowledge to believe that adults who have not made much progress in acquiring literacy in 18 or more years can suddenly learn at a rapid pace compared to typical children in grade

schools." Claims at rapid progress in literacy programs should be examined closely.

o Appropriate Curriculum. Harman contends there is no "top down" curriculum for adult literacy programs which can be effective; curriculum needs to be shaped to the needs of the individual student. The tendency for adults in literacy programs to lose interest quickly has spurred a great deal of interest in computer-based programs. Advocates claim these are self-paced and do no engender feelings of inadequacy which adults might feel with teachers.

However, those who see the "social" aspects of adult literacy programs -- building up of support networks for individuals, for example -- caution about total reliance on computer-based instruction. Further, even the finely honed program developed by Taggart doesn't seem to have solved the problem of retention, although adults who stay with the program for a long time make considerable progress, in comparison to other strategies.

o Teachers Who Care. What little research exists about the quality of teachers for adult basic education points toward the importance

Tales of Two Cities

Outside evaluators studied the literacy needs in two major cities, coming to some conclusions that contradict conventional perceptions about the literacy problem.

In Philadelphia, Research for Better Schools found that the incidence of functional illiteracy may not be as high as sometimes reported; the upper limit in that city may be 12 percent. Another 21 percent, however, are performing below the ninth-grade reading level. Combined, this means that about one-third of the population lack literacy skills -- and are disadvantaged by poverty and unemployment, as well. This population tends to be older, minority, high school dropouts, unemployed or earning less that $10,000 a year.

The study found, however, that those with low levels of literacy have highly developed coping skills for reducing or circumventing problems posed by needing to read and write at certain levels. Many do read, though not efficiently, and see little reason to upgrade their skills. Further, they know where to go to get help with basic skills, but few choose to go, and those who do enroll, usually drop out.

In the Cambridge/Boston area, Jeanne Chall and associates at Harvard University surveyed adult literacy programs in the area, finding that only 2 to 3 percent of the adults who need literacy training were receiving it (based on services in the literacy programs, excluding those in training programs which do not emphasize literacy, industry-based programs and those in prisons). Most centers had waiting lists because of limited funds, the need for more effective methods of assessment and teaching, and the need for greater professionalization.

The dropout rate from the centers ranged between 30 and 50 percent. Center personnel cited the lack of instructional materials for adults at the functional literacy stage. Their materials did not go beyond the perfunctory workbooks and skill sheets.

But the greatest problems faced by the centers, Chall reported, were with adults at the illiterate stage. Those who are English-speaking have extreme difficulty learning, with many of them learning disabled and requiring professional help. Even if these adults are identified and given appropriate help, it may take three or more years to bring them up to a point where they could benefit from local area job training programs, which require at least a 5th-grade reading level. Incidentally, the students were predominantly female.

Funding for those at the illiterate stage was particularly difficult to find, primarily because funding sources "often expect yearly 'success rates' that cannot be met." Thus, many centers accept only the better readers.

Chall also found that because funding depends on quantitative gains in reading, programs "tend to be geared to testing and training specific skills." Thus, she says, "many students graduate, even from advanced literacy programs, unprepared to read the complex materials required in jobs and training programs."

of personal characteristics. Teachers must display respect and confidence in their students. The aspect of adult programs which separates them, in the opinion of participants, from school programs in which they had failed is that of sensitivity on the part of teachers.

Evaluation Cautions

Claims about enrollments, results of "quick fix" programs, long-lasting impact on participants, job placements -- all of these are factors which should be questioned and backed up with data. One problem is that there are no agreed-upon reliable tests for the adult literacy field comparable to standardized testing in the schools. Sticht points out that gains in literacy levels can be greatly overstated by the inappropriate use of testing -- e.g., using a different test used for pre- and post-testing.

Research for Better Schools, an educational laboratory in Philadelphia, has prepared materials on evaluating adult education, which includes a list of common evaluation hazards. It mentions:

* Claiming much, providing evidence of little.
* Selecting measures not logically related to the program
* Use of grade-equivalent scores
* Use of different instruments for pre-testing and post-testing
* Careless collection of data; missing data

Evaluation for public accounting is getting difficult in those programs that are community-based and have goals other than to improve basic skills, although these goals are important and legitimate. How do you evaluate whether or not a person can "take charge" of his/her life and function more successfully?

RESOURCES

Judith Alamprese
Cosmos Corporation
1735 Eye Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20006
(202) 728-3939
Author of *Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS): Impact of the First Year's Task Forces.*

Jeanne Chall
Harvard Graduate School of Education
Appian Way
Cambridge, MA 02138
(617) 495-3521

Miriam Balmuth
Hunter College
695 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10021

Russell Dusewicz, Antonia Neubauer and Keith Kershner
Research for Better Schools
444 North Third Street
Philadelphia, PA 19123-4107
(215) 574-9300

David Harman
Teachers College
Columbia University
Box 20
New York, NY 10012
(212) 925-5831

Thomas Sticht
Applied Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, Inc.
P.O. Box 6640
San Diego, CA 92106
(619) 224-2810

Robert Taggart
Remediation & Training Center
1512 16th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 667-6091

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